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Cahul District in the First Weeks of the Soviet Occupation (June-August 1940)

Sergiu Cornea¹

Abstract: As a result of direct diplomatic and military pressure exerted by the Soviet Union and blackmail by Germany and Italy in support of the aggressor, in June 1940 the Romanian administration and army left the territory of Bessarabia. The aim of the research is to reconstruct the events that occurred in a very complex and equally controversial period in the history of Cahul county –the establishment of the soviet occupation regime in summer 1940. In order to elucidate the subject, was used the method of content analysis of the official documents drawn up by the competent authorities of the “Lower Danube” Land, contained in the archive funds. A reliable source of information on the early days of soviet occupation is the refugees’ testimonies from Bessarabia. Although they provided stoning information, marked by personal feelings, they are still an important source of information because they were provided by eyewitnesses of the events. From the very first days of soviet occupation, soviet-type power structures were created in Bessarabia, and a number of political, economic, social and propaganda measures were taken to establish the soviet regime as soon as possible. The repressive measures taken by the new authorities caused discontent among the population, causing disappointment even to those who enjoyed the “moment of liberation”.

Keywords: Bessarabia; Cahul district; soviet occupation

Introduction

According to the secret protocol of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939, Eastern Europe was divided by Germany and the Soviet Union into spheres of influence. The states, that signed the pact, soon began the World War II with the conquest of Poland, and then the two aggressor states acted in accordance with established agreements: the Soviet Union attacked Finland, annexed the Baltic countries, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina.

In the tradition of doublespeak characteristic of dictators, ‘non-aggression’, as D. Deletant (1992) mentioned, in fact meant aggression against the smaller neighbors

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of Germany and the Soviet Union. Thus, the annexation by the USSR of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina on June 28, 1940 was a direct consequence of the Soviet-German agreements of August 23, 1939 (Cojocaru, 2010, pp. 6-16; Constantin, 2012, p. 89).

In the summer of 1940, Cahul district was a part of the Dunarea de Jos County, which was established in August 1938. As a result of the tragic event, the Dunarea de Jos County lost two Bessarabian districts: Cahul and Ismail.

The purpose of the study is to bring clarity on the events that occurred in the Cahul district in the summer of 1940 – the departure of the Romanian authorities and the establishment of the Soviet occupation regime. The reconstruction of the events was carried out in the spirit of the ideas contained in the European Parliamentary Resolution of September 19, 2019, on the importance of European historical memory for the future of Europe (2019/2819(RSP)), which stipulates that “the memories of Europe’s tragic past must be kept alive, in order to honor the victims, condemn the perpetrators and lay the ground for a reconciliation based on truth and remembrance”.

Research Methodology

For data collection, the method of analyzing the content of official documents, developed by the competent authorities of the Dunarea de Jos County: Royal Resident of the Dunarea de Jos County, the Dunarea de Jos Third Regiment of Gendarmerie and Dunarea de Jos Regional Police Inspectorate was used. In the first weeks of the occupation of Bessarabia, the competent authorities of Romania made significant efforts to collect and systematize information on affairs, in order to get a real full picture of the events that occurred in Bessarabia.

A veridic source of information about the early days of the Soviet occupation is the eye witness testimonies of refugees from Bessarabia. The forced withdrawal of the Romanian troops and administration created chaos and uncertainty among the population due to the fact that the Soviet troops did not adhere to the deadlines set for the invasion of Bessarabia.

Even though the testimonies of the people who could repatriate themselves during July provided accounts that are heavily influenced by personal emotions, these are nevertheless an important source of information regarding the events happening in

the ceded territories as they are provided by the people who actually witnessed these events unfolding before their eyes

Also, the published documents and the relevant scientific literature was studied during the process of preparation for this paper

Research Results

The situation in the early days of the Soviet occupation was reconstituted in accordance with the summary data contained in the reports prepared by the competent authorities of the Romanian state and on the basis of information provided by the refugee population in the Cahul district.

A. The reports of the Romanian Gendarmerie and Police, regarding the situation in Cahul district

The situation in the early days of the Soviet occupation can be reconstituted based on the data summarized in the report of the Dunarea de Jos Regional Police Inspectorate in Galati for the period from June 27 to July 7, 1940. The first information received from Bessarabia was summarized as follows:

- Traders' goods are collected and stored in cooperatives;
- Food is provided using a stamp system and for foods that are considered less necessary, prices are set too high, so a kilogram of animal fat is 400 lei.
- All the luxurious buildings, and the goods of the people who are deemed to have too much, are taken away, and only the most necessary is left. The same happens with clothes.
- It is decided that the remaining in Bessarabia authorities should be sent inside Russia and replaced by Soviet officials.
- Everyone would be called to work, including women, who are forbidden to wear luxury, some sort of standard clothing is established.
- Hydro and power plants do not work regularly because in order to save gasoline, petrol and oils.
- Romanian money is still circulating in the market.
- The crosses of all Churches are demolished.

- “Those who discharged themselves from our army in Bessarabia, are very unhappy with how the Russian authorities treat them” (F. 78\1940, f. 631-632).

The Falciu Legion of the Gendarme on August 11, 1940, reported the following events in Bessarabia:

- “All major owners were picked up and transported in closed wagons, not knowing the destination. Their possessions were distributed among the population
- The public order is maintained by well-armed Jews.
- Population is forcibly sent to the field work and is under the supervision of the Jews.
- Almost everything was taken from their homes, leaving only a minimum of clothes for each member of the household.
- Children, aged 7 years old and older, are taken into evidence and should be sent to Russia to study the Russian language and crafts.
- Former public officials are looking for the right time to move to Romania.
- The population of Bessarabia is very dissatisfied with the current regime and is looking forward to the return of the Romanian troops” (F.133\1940, p. 271).

In the reports of the Dunarea de Jos Third Regiment of Gendarmerie, on “the mood of the population in July 1940 in the Dunarea de Jos County and Dunarea de Jos Regional Police Inspectorate, in connection with the latest events”, presented to the Royal Resident of the Dunarea de Jos County on July 30, 1940, the summarized information collected during a month on “the current situation in the occupied territory (Cahul and Ismail) and the aspect of life under the new regime” (F. 153\1939-1940, pp. 39-41; 46-48). The essential aspects presented in this report can be summarized as follows:

In Cahul, until the Romanian authorities were completely evacuated in the city it was peace and order, after they left a “a local Soviet committee was created, among the leaders of which was Teodor Ostascu, the Head of the service of the Dunarea de Jos County, who immediately left Galati, when he learned about the Soviet ultimatum, the priest Matei Tomsa, Director of the Gymnasium and the commander of the Cahul Legion of Guards, the head doctor of Tiscovschi district, engineer Ohman and others”.

Immediately after the arrival of the Soviet troops, the buildings of the Romanian institutions were occupied in the first place, military guard being placed at each building. Local police administration bodies were organized, involving Russian and Lipovan minorities, known to have communist sentiments. From the point of view of leadership in the administration, currently, the Jewish element is playing a dominant role in the occupied territory.

Romanian elements began to be collected and deported to unknown places inside Russia. In the cities “continues the so-called cleaning of elements that turned out to be dangerous for the new regime. The victims of this measure fell, all those, with a few exceptions, who held posts under the Romanian administration, the rich people who have been convicted as a result of petty hatred and revenge, who were taken from their homes, kept closed, the end of their fate, however is not in sight”.

All goods were confiscated from the commercial warehouses. Shops and commercial entities that were left opened, gradually closed, because in just three weeks all stocks were completely exhausted and there was nowhere to import the goods from. The depletion of stocks was also taken place due to the fact that the representatives of new regime bought large quantities of goods, “weaving items, fabrics, all kinds of drapers were greedily bought by Soviet army officers, leaving the red soldiers to buy watches and razors, items after which a real hunt took place” (F. 153\1939-1940, p. 41).

A census of all private buildings was carried out in the cities, the owners were left with only the apartments that they occupied during the census, but the rest of buildings, which were rented and whose income was in favor of the owners, were transferred to the city committee, which “having in its hands the entire communal administration, will distribute them”.

All grain stocks were collected, leaving to the population only with necessary minimum. The measure was carried out by the Red Army, because, having many soldiers stationed throughout Southern Bessarabia, it needs to supply troops and animals. In the villages, grain harvesting caused deep dissatisfaction among the rural population, especially since a new crop was harvested under the control of the Soviet authorities, that collected all available quantities without any payment to producers.

To attract the rural population to their side, the local Soviet authorities initially made propaganda statements that the land would not be confiscated by the state, but would be shared with the poor population, so that no plot of land exceeds 30 hectares. The measures were taken to ensure that the plots exceeding an area of 30 hectares was

distributed among the poor peasants with all the crops made by the former owners, so that the new owners could reap the benefits in the same year.

The Soviet authorities did not provide any additional information about the beginning of the implementation of the agrarian reform, in fact, the agrarian reform, as it was applied, was only a propaganda tool for the population of Bessarabia and had a “double pursue: a) the new leadership, coming to the aid of the poor working class, seeks to attach it to the Soviet regime and b) satisfying short term aspirations of the class that was used with private property for centuries thus ensuring that reactionary actions will not take place and that the new administration can rely on this class in the future.

At the same time, “propagandists of the new communist regime”, in propaganda campaigns conducted in urban areas in accordance with official directives and in the context of maintaining the appearance of private property, “did not avoid to share, both at meetings and another type of propaganda, that the current state will not last long, and this individual property will disappear soon, giving way to a regime of collectivization” (F.153\1939-1940, p. 39; 47). Through such propaganda activities, the ground for the forced collectivization was prepared.

Children, between the ages of 7 and 14, began to be admitted in communist institutions.

Mandatory work was introduced for everyone, regardless of class. The poor are fed at the boiler, the daily meal consisting of soup, prepared from canned fish.

Churches have been transformed into group dormitories, concert halls, stables, goods and food warehouses.

The store of spirit drinks have been closed and alcoholic beverages are no longer served because, from the very beginning of the evacuations, the population kept drinking and indulged in illegal and immoral acts.

In an informative note of the competent authorities of July 20, 1940 was reported: “All the valuable objects from the Churches in the Bessarabian towns and villages were confiscated, the icons destroyed, and the Churches transformed into stables and warehouses.

Bessarabian authorities confiscated and stored all the crops that they began to collect. Food has become so expensive that the cost of a kilogram of bread exceeds 50 lei, but workers receive as remuneration instead of money, vouchers that are presented at the food warehouse.

The deserters from the Romanian army, whom the Soviet authorities catch, are sent inside Russia, at over 300 km from the Romanian border.

Starting from July 12, all commercial shops are closed, and the goods are confiscated by the Soviet authorities from Bessarabia” (F. 133\1940, p. 50).

B. Refugee testimonies regarding the establishment of the Soviet regime in Cahul district

The testimonies and feelings of the refugees from Bessarabia represent an important source of information and documentation, regarding the first days of the establishment of the Soviet occupation regime. The reports of the refugee population about the events and process that took place, the attitude and behaviour of the Soviet authorities and troops towards the native population, the reactions of the population to the actions taken by the “new masters” are very important in restoring historical truth.

Even if their reactions to what happened are fragmentary and influenced by their emotional state due to the interaction with the Soviet regime, these testimonies are very valuable from the perspective of studying the mechanism of establishing the Soviet regime and the impact that had happened not only on Bessarabia but on whole Romania.

According to the information notes from the Braila Police Headquarters, the wife of a resident - Nistor Wolf, from Cahul, left Cahul with four small children on July 11, 1940, leaving two more children in the care of her husband, who refused to repatriate. She reported the following:

- All civil servants and their families left in Bessarabia were arrested and imprisoned together with wealthy Jews, whose money was taken.
- The Soviet authorities, in order to show of to the population, the social life in Russia, carried on the streets of Cahul two children, one from a rich family and another from a poor family, so the inhabitants could compare how different categories of people lived.
- The Soviet authorities issued an order stating that all residents of Cahul are under the obligation to declare to the authorities the property they own within 2 months. Then, it was announced that public canteens would be set up, where only those who

will prove that they were working were fed, but, those, who would not work, would be sent to labour colonies (F.133\1940, p. 53).

Colonel Gheorghe Grozea, head of the Covurlui County Police Office, reported on August 15, 1940, in the Report sent to the Directorate – General of Police, regarding the informative activities carried out from July 15 to August 15, 1940, that the crossing over the Prut river were quite numerous at the beginning and during July and lower in the first quarter of August. This fact, in his opinion, proves that “the Russians strengthened security measures at the border, preventing fraudulent crossings”. From the contact made with the refugees, were notified several aspects, regarding the establishment of the Soviet regime in Cahul County.

Thereby, on July 15, 1940, young Gavril Vasilopol, born in Galati city, passed through Oancea, and remained in Cahul, motivating that he had an old mother and had to take care of her, but, seeing the measures taken by the Russians, he decided to take refuge in Romania. He provided the following details about the “new order”:

- Immediately, after the occupation of the city by the Russians, they set up guards at all institutions, passing them under the authority of the army.
- From among the Lipovans they formed the city police, having the task of spying on those who will not harbour the communist feeling and whom they will arrest at night. Thus, many citizens were arrested and were transported by van cars during the night to unknown places.
- A few days after the Cahul occupation, the following persons were arrested: the director of the penitentiary, primary doctor Tishcovschi, the director of the boys’ high school, namely Tomsa, the captain of the Public Guards Murgea; the owners Visinovschi, Nunca etc.
- In front of the army and population gathered in the city square, the Russian commander gave a speech, in which he showed that, after 22 years of torment, the Bessarabia was retaken. Among other things, he said that the population and youth should receive a special education, because now they have entered a new era – the era of communism.
- After the speech, 30 – 40 tanks and armoured cars marched in a military parade.
- In the city of Cahul a committee of peasants was formed, under the presidency of an unknown Ioan, proceeding to divide the fortunes of the refugees from Bessarabia.

– The Russian command issued a proclamation obliging all those who own more than 4000 lei to immediately deposit them to banks. Thus, the Jew Strul Singher and his bothers deposited 2000000 lei each (The dismemberment of Romania, 2017, pp. 275-276).

On August 13, 1940, the Covurlui Gendarmes Legion reported that on July 20, Nastasia Cristofan (Nastasia Hristofor, in another document), a former resident of Zirnesti commune, Paicu village, Cahul County, passed from Bessarabia to Romania. In conversations with the Commander of the Legion, she reported the following about the situation in Bessarabia:

– In the Paicu village, there was a patrol of three soldiers, who rotated, spending the day more through the bushes and the edges of the village. At night, they patrolled the village, and the people whom they found, took to Cucoara village, where the Russian border picket was located. In the east and south of the village Zirnesti, where the mansion of the owner Chirila Cricopol, who moved to Romania, was located, a border picket was set up, from which soldiers from Paicu and Cucoara were brought.

– In several days, several different tanks and different cars passed on the road, leading from Cahul to Leova, which when asked by the bystanders, said that they were going in the direction of Falcu.

– Nastasia Cristofan's husband, walking with fish for sale to the Lingura village and passing through several villages east of the Paicu village, about 4 km away, saw a large army, horses and cannons.

– Once, a truck loaded with girls and women drove out of Cahul, to which were added three girls from the Paicu village, heading to Soviet Russia to see the way of life there, was spotted.

– From the first day of the arrival of Russian troops, gangs of civilians devastated the buildings of the big owners, ruining and stealing everything. The estate, starting from 106 km and to Cahul, was commissioned by people from Cahul. The estate of C. Ghilis was given to people from Paicu village.

– It was rumored that children from 6 years old, would be taken away and transferred to unknown places. In the Paicu village, it was ordered to reserve 3 houses as a school, where women and people under the age of 30, as well as boys, girls and children, will study.

- Also, there was a rumor, that all the refugees, who passed to Romania were shot and that the valuables and everything they had on them was taken by the Romanian state.
- On June 17, from the wealthy householders in the village the sheep were taken, and were divided among poor. In Paicu village as a delegate of the village, was named an individual who until the Russians' arrival was an ordinary mediocre man.
- In the Baurci village, the former perception agent Periclie Platon, being married to a Bessarabian woman and remaining there, was put to guard the village cows, but the former cow keeper, being Russian, was installed as a mayor.
- The former perception agent from Zirnesti commune, Cahul County, being denounced by the population from the village, as if during the Romanian rule, he had committed illegalities, after 2-3 interrogations that would have been taken from him, he would have been shot (F. 133\1940, p. 299; *The dismemberment of Romania*, 2017, p. 276).

The informative note of the Covurlui Gendarmes Legion, referring to the state of affairs in Bessarabia during July 1940, contains some testimonies of the refugees Cahul County, who crossed the border at Oancea point on July 29, 1940.

Atena Lecata, of ethnic Romanian origin, informed the authorities that once Bessarabia was evacuated, she could not cross into Romania due to the lack of transport, and remained at her home in Cahul. From the occupation of the Cahul city until July 29, 1940, she continuously requested the Russian command to be repatriated, but she was told that the Romanian Government would no longer receive her. On July 29, she was led by two Russian sentries to the Romanian border, Oancea point, where she entered the country. Atena Lecata, during the Soviet occupation noticed the following phenomena:

- There are many troops in Cahul city, but the military equipment is camouflaged. The Russian army is well equipped and well fed, receiving meals several times a day.
- Romanian officials, who remained in Cahul were arrested and imprisoned in the Cahul penitentiary and not allowed to communicate with any of their families with no one knowing their fate.

- The valuables of those who left in Romania, were confiscated. The valuables of the remaining inhabitants were not confiscated, leaving each citizen to gather his harvest until next autumn when everyone will enter the community.
- There are still many Romanian families, who want to repatriate, but they are afraid to ask for repatriation for the reason that they will not be approved by the Soviet Government and then it is now unknown what their fate will be (F. 133\1940, p. 201).

Sacaiani Grigore, of Greek ethnic origin, informed the authorities that due to the lack of evacuation transport, he remained in Cahul. On June 30, 1940, around 5 o'clock in the morning, he was completely robbed by the gang of civilians, taking everything he had in the house and even his clothes. He drew attention to the following realities of Soviet life in Cahul:

- In general, the population is dissatisfied with the regime, except for the lower classes who are satisfied.
- The civilian population, especially the “upper class”, is living under constant terror because the Russian Government is forcing them to equalize with the “lower classes”.
- Gasoline and oil are completely missing on the Cahul market.
- On July 28, new Russian troops arrived in Cahul. (F. 133\1940, p. 201 verso).

Maria Memos Lecata, of Greek ethnic origin, related the following:

- Some of the officials, who held various positions in the Romanian government, remained and continue to hold positions in the Russian regime.
- The population is free to speak any language, but the lower classes lives only in entertainment in the public garden, playing music.
- In Cahul city, there are many army soldiers, border guards, cavalry, etc, who are housed in the former barracks of the 68th Infantry Regiment of the Romanian army.

Olga Memo, of Greek origin, residing in Cahul, informed that numerous troops are stationed in Cahul and, immediately, after the occupation of Cahul by Russian troops, Romanian officials were arrested and taken to prison, being given food only once a day and forbidden to communicate with their families (F. 133\1940, p. 201 verso).

Maria Iulia Chirila, of Romanian origin, residing in Bucharest, reported that she came every summer to Cahul, where she had her house and where this year she was caught by Russian troops. Here, immediately after the occupation of the Russian troops on the morning of June 30, 1940, at around 5 o'clock in the morning, she was robbed by a gang of Russians and Lipovans, taking from her everything she had on her, as well as the documents she possessed. During her stay in the occupied Cahul city, she notices the following:

- In Cahul city, whoever voices the Jew (jidani) word is immediately sentenced to 3 months of prison.
- In Cahul city, I saw about 15 tanks and others camouflaged cars in the public garden, and at a distance of 3 km from Cahul to Oancea, she saw several camouflaged water tanks.
- In Cahul, there are only two open churches, one Romanian and another Lipovanian.
- Elders are advised to leave the church, because youth is not allowed to attend church, but elders would not agree to maintain a church on their own.
- Sugar, oil, gasoline and petrol are completely missing (F. 133\1940, p. 201 verso).

It is relevant for understanding the ways of action of the Soviet regime in the occupied territories, the brief analysis of the relations offered by the Bessarabian refugees made by Colonel Gheorghe Grozea, to the Head of the Police Office Covurlui County in mid-August 1940:

“... Russian troops have tolerated the formation of gangs that have committed robberies. They instituted the Police from hoodlums, who indulged in unjustified acts of revenge.”

The lands and cattle of the owners, as well as the property of the refugees, were plundered and divided among the poor.

From all the reports and verifications made personally, results that most of the inhabitants of Bessarabia are dissatisfied due to the uncertainty and the acts of vandalism that take place” (The dismemberment of Romania, 2017, pp. 276-277).

Although the testimonies of the refugees are influenced by their personal experience and emotions, stemmed from escaping from occupied Bessarabia, they present a true

picture of the daily relations of those times, with all the nuances and peculiarities, often avoided or falsified by the Soviet authorities.

Discussions

Although, on December 24, 1989, the Second Congress of People Deputies of the URSS officially condemned the signing of additional secret protocol of the non-aggression pact and described it as null and void since its signing, and noting that in the last three decades there have been many precious works in which the events of June – August 1940 are objectively reflected (Șișcanu, 1993; Ibid., 2007), in the post-soviet states, the Soviet propaganda clichés continue to produce their effects.

In order to avoid the propaganda traps, created for ideological reasons, it is very important to capitalize on the documents in the archives that reflect the situation of that period. From this perspective, the documents elaborated by the Romanian authorities and the reports of the refugee population from Bessarabia during the retreat and in the first days of the Soviet occupation, are very useful.

Conclusions

Following the direct diplomatic and military pressure, exerted by the Soviet Union and the blackmail, exerted by Germany and Italy in aggressor's support, in June 1940, the Romanian administration and army left, without resistance, the territory of Bessarabia.

From the very first days of the Soviet occupation, Soviet-type power structures were created in Bessarabia and a series of political, economic, social, propagandistic measures were carried out, meant to establish the Soviet regime as soon as possible.

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